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ABSTRACT

Federal regulations and general public indifference toward teachers, among other problems, are crippling educational progress. A national direction for education is needed. One considering general and societal concerns in the local school district, and special concerns relating to continuing professional education will provide a realistic sense of direction for all citizens. Major duties in this new direction include: (1) clarification of what schools should or should not be expected to do; (2) development of short and long range goals, creating a framework from which professionals can work; and (3) determination of the degree of commitment individual citizens and the nation as a whole have to education. (SAS)

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POSITION PAPER

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CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary
and Vocational Education

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This paper reviews three topics which relate to educational concerns both now and in the foreseeable future. It then suggests some possible ways of providing for those concerns. The three topics are: (a) general societal concerns relating to education, (b) concerns relating to education from the local school district point of view, and (c) special concerns relating to the continuing education of professional staff members.

General Societal Concerns

Education, like all public institutions, is currently suffering from general malaise and loss of support, both psychological and economic. Although its record is not as bad as its reputation, and it does fare better than other public institutions (including the Congress) when it comes to public esteem, it struggles constantly against a pervasive lack of confidence. Unfortunately, this lack of confidence, supported by horror stories of those who are graduated from school unable to read or write, or with inadequate survival skills, is making itself felt in the form of growing criticism, talk of voucher systems, and an increasing tendency for those who can afford to do so to seek private school education for their children. The spectre of a school system which has been desegregated by court order and which has become re-segregated through this process is frightening. Increasingly, the public schools may become the domain of racial minorities and the poor. This movement is likely to stratify society more and more rather than to make it more egalitarian.

Ironically, at the same time that education is losing public confidence, it is being subjected to ever-increasing pressures to become the base from which social problems such as racial inequality, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and

equity for the handicapped can be solved. It is held responsible for these problems although they are not primarily educational but reach to the heart of society. At the same time it is severely chastized for its inability to do what it was essentially intended to do--give young people the kind of learning skills which enable them to be confident contributing adults.

Even if the school were to accept responsibility for all the demands made on it, society has no consensus as to what the schools should or should not be expected to do. And therein lies one of the greatest needs of education--and society at large--at the present time. That is the need for a sense of common purpose for education as one of its major institutions. What is essential is some kind of national agreement about what education can reasonably be expected to do--and by the same token--what it can not reasonably be expected to do. Until such a national course is charted, educators and the nation will continue to wallow in indecision, increasing criticism, and frustration regarding the education of its youth--and perhaps its adults.

School District Concerns

School districts today are struggling with a multiplicity of problems. Economic constraints impinge directly on every phase of operation from increased salary demands for teachers caught in the web of inflation to difficulties faced due to rapidly escalating heating costs. The net result of the growing demands on the schools, increasing costs, and unwillingness of the public to adequately fund education results in the impossible paradox of needing to provide more services with less resources. This is especially painful when it is acknowledged that generally those school districts which have consistently spent more money for all students have consistently produced better test results. It appears obvious that as resources decline, quality will also decline.

Too frequently, state and federal governmental units (responding to their constituencies) place requirements on the schools for which inadequate funding

is not forthcoming. An example of this is the enormous amount of accommodations school districts must make in meeting the requirements of 94-142--much of which must come from existing funds, not supplemental. When such expenses (which are far out of the ordinary) must come from the budget, the program for "regular" students must be diminished in some way or additional revenues must be acquired through increasing the burden of local taxpayers. One wonders how soon the parents of "normal" children will begin to demand the individual attention now being required for students at each end of the continuum.

The growth of citizen militance and demands for involvement have placed the school district in the uncomfortable position of having to attempt to respond to a variety of publics--frequently publics which are in direct disagreement with each other. And these publics show little tendency to collaborate or even to compromise in meeting mutual goals, relying on such confrontation strategies as those promoted by Saul Alinsky to promote their causes. As these demands become progressively more difficult to meet in toto, it is likely that many high quality individuals will become disenchanted with the abuse they must take and will leave administration and teaching. Equally as sad--or perhaps even sadder--effective, conscientious board members who are interested in looking at the total picture and promoting quality education for all youth within the limits of the community's ability to support, will find the personal sacrifice and psychological harrassment not worth the effort and will abandon education to those with more narrow special interests, impoverishing it even more.

Local school districts constantly struggle to meet the demands of their local constituencies, but they are also forced to overcome obstacles placed in their paths by their friends in the state and federal education bureaucracies who tend to strangle the local district through a multiplicity of regulations. Accountability comes down more to suspicion and distrust than to mutual effort toward the solution of serious problems.

As teachers begin to flex their political muscle and turn more and more to the use of the strike to make themselves heard, the rift between teachers and administrators widens, and the concerns of students are frequently not given primary consideration. As teachers close ranks in the negotiations process, there also is danger that it will become more and more difficult to remove the inept staff member and to upgrade the quality of the personnel who work with students.

Continuing Professional Development Concerns

In times of tight money, it is characteristic that the last programs to be included in the budget are the first to be considered for elimination. Because of the fact that inservice training or staff development programs are some of the most recently added across the country, they are among those first considered for elimination.

Sadly, there appears to be no other reasonable alternative for the upgrading and revitalizing of educators. Because of the declining student enrollments and consequent growing stagnation of the job market teachers will continue to remain in their present situations for most or all of their careers.

And so, there is a distinct possibility that the very means by which student test scores might be raised, by which students can learn to become productive citizens contributing to the economic base, and by which teachers can be encouraged to find more professional satisfaction in their work--potentially changing the pessimistic tone of the society--may be foregone because of the lack of recognition of its significance.

This is a bit like the saying, "For lack of a nail the shoe was lost; for lack of a shoe, the horse was lost; for lack of a horse, the rider was lost; for lack of a rider, the battle was lost." For lack of attention to the continuing educational needs of teachers on site, the educational battle may be lost.

Recommendations

We as a nation need desperately to give serious, immediate attention to the purposes of education. We need to focus our attention on it as never before. We need to get the best minds in our country to look at its possibilities—and its limitations—and to determine a national direction for it which will provide a realistic sense of direction for all citizens—recognizing that all citizens are affected by education in critical ways.

One way of accomplishing this Herculean task would be to commission the new Cabinet officer for Education, when appointed, to organize to conduct local and regional consensus-building conventions between now and 1985, which should be followed by a national convention having as its purposes:

1. Clarification of what schools should and should not be expected to do.
2. Development of short and long range goals which will, in effect, provide a framework within which educators can work positively constructively, and flexibly toward common ends.
3. Determination of what commitment we as individuals and a nation have to education—both in terms of human energy and economic commitment in the light of the goals enunciated.

Short of this kind of national consensus-building effort, it would be helpful if there were a less complex set of regulations governing the activities of local school districts—many of which make it more difficult to provide quality instruction for students than more possible. Direct grants to schools without the need for satisfying layer after layer of the bureaucracy and providing separate mini-administrators for each separate program program which drain off funds applicable for student services, would be most welcome.

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